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New Professionals in Student Affairs:

What They Didn't Teach You in Graduate School

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Author note

I thank Dawn R. Person for her valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. This paper is based on a presentation given at the 1993 meeting of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Boston, Massachusetts.

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Abstract

Recent graduates of College Student Personnel programs from 5 universities were surveyed on their job search process, reasons for choosing their current job, their experiences with institutional policies, and ethical and political situations they encountered as new professionals. The results indicated that between 26% and 44% of these new professionals experienced some dissatisfaction with the job search process and their current job. With attrition in the field approaching 50% (Burns, M., 1982; Hancock, J., 1988), it is important for both graduate program faculty and practitioners to pay attention to these voices and take a critical look at the way entry-level professionals are educated, recruited and supervised.

New Professionals in Student Affairs:

What They Didn't Teach You in Graduate School

Introduction

A master's degree in College Student Personnel is generally accepted as the entry-level degree for a position in Student Affairs. Several studies have looked at what preparation at this level should mean and what competencies a new professional should possess to satisfy the basic skills (e.g., administrative, counseling, programmatic, etc.) and theoretical requirements of the field (Foley, 1989; Hancock, 1988; Henry, 1985; Hyman, 1988; Ostroth, 1981). Since the degree is frequently a prerequisite for getting a job, however, an additional component of these programs should be to help students in the job search process through networking, formal and informal advising and letters of reference, as well to assist the student in understanding what kind of job it is for which he or she is applying (Oblander, 1990). Student affairs involves many different jobs, and even more job titles, on thousands of campuses in the United States alone. Confusion over the variety of positions and the responsibilities that are a part of being in student affairs is understandable. Part of the responsibilities of our graduate programs is to help clarify this uncertainty.

Sometimes the individuals who have prepared themselves in our graduate programs, however, experience conflict between what they have learned in graduate school and what they encounter in the field, facing problems with supervisors and colleagues, and poor or inaccurate job descriptions. During their job search, often restricted to a limited geographic region, many find the interview process trying and the

job offers few. The situation can seem frustrating and discouraging to a new professional beginning a career, and can lead them to rethink their commitment to the field. Certainly, with between 25% and 50% of new professionals leaving student affairs within five years (Burns, 1982; Hancock, 1988; Holmes, et al, 1983), there is much that can be done to keep the enthusiasm and fresh approaches that this loss represents. It seems in order to respond to this issue, we need to look at the thoughts and feelings of the newest members of the profession to discover the frustrations that are particular to gaining and keeping an entry-level position.

The background to the current study comes from personal experience. As a new professional in student affairs in the 1991-1992 academic year, I had just attended my first conference as a full-time professional. Graduate students still in my program at Teachers College besieged my former classmates and me with questions about what it was like "out there." They wanted to know what to expect, what kinds of jobs to look for and what kinds of jobs to avoid. I felt that I had learned much in my first year on the job and I was only too happy to share some of my experiences. My colleagues had similar experiences, some better some worse, but all to be considered learning experiences. As we began to share what we had learned with the crowd that had gathered, I began to think that a similar discussion, conducted honestly and openly by a cross-section of new professionals, would provide a valuable resource to current graduate students looking for their first job and make them aware of some of the different pitfalls we had encountered. I went back to my campus and started to conceptualize how something like this would be done.

I decided that I wanted to pass along not just subjective information to the current

students, but I wanted to give them some concrete data to consider. I also realized that I was not interested in what people who had been in the field a long time had to say about the issues that new professionals would face; I wanted to get information from those who were most recently removed from the cradle of graduate school, those who remembered what their expectations were and how these variables were considered in the job search. I wanted to hear their stories about their first year on the job and what they learned and what they wished they had known. Mostly, however, I wanted to bring a group of my colleagues together to talk with graduate students about available career options and what they did to secure their jobs.

Study

To obtain data about the experiences of new professionals, a brief survey was designed in the fall of 1992. Directed toward recent graduates of preparatory programs, the instrument contained questions regarding their job search process, reasons for choosing their current job, their experiences with institutional policies, and ethical and political situations they encountered as new professionals. A final section allowed the respondents to comment in their own words on any aspect of their experiences. Six programs, selected because of their national reputations, were contacted and asked to provide a mailing list of graduates from the class of 1991. Five programs provided usable lists and in December of 1992, 84 one-page surveys were mailed to a random convenient sample of 1991 graduates of The University of Vermont, Indiana University, Teachers College - Columbia University and The University of Maryland - College Park. Bowling Green State University graduates from both 1991 and 1992 received the survey.

By January of 1993, 50 completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 60%.

Findings

The responses roughly reflected the demographics of new professionals in Student Affairs (Freeman, Nuss & Barr, 1993; Ostroth, 1981). Approximately two-thirds of the responses came from women and 18% from people of color. Half reported that their jobs were in Residential Life. 90% of the new professionals were under 28 years old. From this broad sample, however, came an interesting pattern. The data seemed to show that some expectations that new professionals had of the new job may not be being met. For example:

- 26% said their job title did not reflect their actual responsibilities;
- 44% said many things surprised them about their job;
- 38% said their budget was inadequate for their job;
- 30% said on-campus interviews did not give them a good idea of what the institution was like;
- 26% said they did not use the theory they learned in graduate school.

While these responses reflect a minority view, they are still important voices to hear. They point to potential frustrations experienced by new professionals in their first year on the job that may add to the already stressful experience of the new work environment. Arguably for this portion of the population -- one-quarter to two-fifths of the master's recipients -- the first job in student affairs is full of surprises and quite possibly not what

they thought they were training for in graduate school. Interestingly, these percentages are very close to the rate of attrition from the field as reported by other studies (Burns, 1982; Hancock, 1988; Holmes, et al., 1983). Perhaps a question for future research is whether these new professionals are beginning to think about leaving the field.

Other themes that deserve further research and exploration emerged both from the responses to the questions on the survey as well as from the handwritten comments volunteered by the new professionals.

40% of the respondents thought that ethical issues were a greater part of the job than they had imagined. Some responses were quite clear in their disillusionment toward those in the field and reflected unexpected experience with ethical issues or political situations during their first year on the job.

> Campus politics surprised me the most about my job, and neither interviews nor materials prepared me. There are far too many administrators at my institution who want power, control or knowledge and value them over doing right by the students.

> Institutional cultures and politics affect your decision-making a lot more than you would like and conversely student development theory a lot less than you would like.

> As far as ethical issues are concerned - sometimes I feel like the conscience of our department. I am always asking the ethical questions and sometimes feel like a real

> troublemaker. But at least I've got some people thinking about some things. I never expected to jump right into a role like that!

Student affairs, as does every area in the academy, has its own ethical dilemmas and political quandaries. However, new professionals in particular sometimes must walk a thin line between the needs of students, professional commitments and the requirements of the institution. A delicate balance between idealism and realism must be developed to satisfy these competing responsibilities. Yet the surprise expressed in these responses is troubling. What does this say about the training of new professionals to thoughtfully handle the critical issues they must face every day in their positions? What does it say about the morally ambiguous situations in which our new professionals sometimes find themselves? It is important to recognize that some of the most difficult ethical decisions must be made by the newest members of the profession at night in the residence halls and on the weekends at the student organizations' events. The training and support they receive in dealing with these issues are crucial.

Over 30% of the sample said that they were not treated professionally when they applied for jobs in student affairs. One respondent was adamant on this point:

> I was, and still am, shocked and appalled at the unprofessionalism of some institutions' job searches. I had to call several institutions to find that the position was filled (after a campus interview and such). I still have not been officially notified by one institution, ... and it has been 1-1/2 years. Many campus interviews

were terribly timed, arranged or planned.

Another respondent accepted a job and then ran into problems:

> During my job search, I was promised some things that I did not get in writing. That was a huge mistake and I've been fighting it ever since ... . If I had to do it over again, I would make sure I got everything in writing. I was so trusting -- it seems foolish now.

How does this affect the individual's view of the field when his or her first contact with it is so unprofessional? With all the competing demands of our regular jobs, how can we assure that each candidate is shown the respect she or he deserves? We may be tempted to paint a glowing picture of the institution or the advertised position to attract a top candidate, but we should realize how such tactics affect the integrity of the search process, as well as the implications for retention of new professionals who are recruited in this way. The opportunity that a campus interview gives to both the candidate and the institution to closely examine each other should not be squandered by such treatment.

86% said it mattered to them what area of the country their job was in. Location was given as the number one reason for choosing a job by over half the respondents. Whether new professionals are looking for a job in a particular area or not, however, the job market often determines how successful they will be.

> My job search started out to be very focused regionally. When few jobs opened up, and when I saw the overwhelming response to what few jobs there were, I decided to broaden my search.

Others made a decision about where they wanted to be and then successfully employed a geographically focussed job search strategy.

> Once I had decided where I wanted to live, I called ahead to the schools in the area and talked to the directors of the areas I was interested in being a part of. This was quite well received and it helped in establishing a network. I had directors at one school tell directors at other schools that I was looking and that they had seen my resume and had talked with me. The result was two schools contacting me to apply for positions they had available after I had just been offered my current position. So, the magic word for me was network!

Still others had no problems with the process:

> My job search was quite unique. I knew the area I wished to be in and I kept watching for job postings. I sent out one resume, received an initial interview, second interview, and was offered the position.

The fact that location is so important has implications for the coordination and advising of the job search process, both in terms of resources used and appropriate strategies. Does

this mean that employers and graduate students alike should concentrate their energies on regional conferences, thereby focusing their resources on a particular geographic area? Are there areas of the country that have better opportunities than others for entry-level employment?

Another theme crucial to job satisfaction emerged from the handwritten comments volunteered by the recipients. Candid statements about supervisors revealed the important role these individuals play in one's work environment.

> After I accepted the position, the person who was to supervise me changed. I went from having a supervisor who understood and bought into student development theory to a supervisor who thought Chickering was a spice. ... It really did change the situation for me immensely.

> I asked all the right questions, but what doesn't shine through is how different supervisors make the job significantly different. I got lucky but some of my co-workers are having a very different experience.

> My ... supervisor is an incredible micro-manager who doesn't trust her staff to make any decisions. She can be irrational and erratic -- I am frequently unsure how she will respond to a given situation. I fear for my job at times ... .

> I would definitely stress the importance of checking out the fit between you and your direct supervisor. It makes all the difference in the world to have a good

relationship there.

A good supervisor can inspire and motivate a new employee to use his or her talents for the benefit of the institution. Part of that ability comes from understanding what skills are being brought to the job and how they can best be utilized. When a supervisor does not respect her or his staff, however, the frustration and "fear" the employees feel are detrimental not only to their ability to fulfill their responsibilities, but to their ability to grow and learn in the job as well.

Summary

The responses received from this survey make it clear that new graduates have many experiences ahead that will have an impact on their success and satisfaction as new professionals. Their experiences, by and large, do not concern knowledge of student development theory nor competence in a counseling role. They are work related in the sense of office politics, interpersonal skills and awareness of one's surroundings. They involve having a realistic picture of the job of the student affairs professional and one's role in that position. Perhaps some of this information cannot really be taught; it must be experienced to be learned. As one new professional commented,

> There are so many factors when going into a job, and often you don't discover what is important to you until after you have started somewhere. ... It is important not to start out looking for the "perfect" job, because your definition of that might still be under construction. There is a lot to learn from any job.

While the majority of the responses in this study reflected the over-all positive experiences of most new professionals, the reports of various forms of dissatisfaction deserve closer examination, especially as they relate to issues of retention. Faculty should look at their graduate programs to ensure that new professionals are being prepared adequately for the job search and work experience. At the same time, practitioners should pay attention to these voices and look closely at the jobs they are asking new professionals to perform.

The initial questions that prompted a survey of new professionals involved the process by which graduate students acquired their first job, as well as what they experienced in that job. The results, however, lead to some different questions. More specifically, what do graduate students expect from their first job? What is the basis of these expectations? Does this match what new professionals actually experience in their first year? How are future expectations changed by experience? These questions will be addressed in future research involving both graduate students and new professionals.

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